A researcher at the University of Brighton is working with UEFA, the Union of European Football Associations, and groups representing football supporters to ensure that fans are involved in initiatives to tackle racism, homophobia and violence.

Football fans often receive widespread negative media publicity for antisocial behaviours and politicians blame fans for causing trouble. Dr Mark Doidge, a researcher at the university, successfully led a project funded by UEFA to investigate whether anti-racist activism by fans challenged racism and xenophobia. The research was undertaken in Poland, Germany and Italy in order to gain an international, cross-cultural understanding of fan engagement.

The findings revealed the different tactics and practices fans have used to establish progressive activist groups to pressure football clubs, federations and governments to tackle discrimination.

As Dr Doidge said: “Football has the power to unite millions of people across the world. It also becomes a way for fans to divide and discriminate. Across Europe, football fans have engaged in racist abuse for several decades; no football league has escaped. Solving this problem has to go beyond simple punishment and legislation, and build on the positive actions already taken by some fans and grassroots organisations.”

As a direct outcome of this research Dr Doidge is now working with the Football Supporters’ Federation and Football Supporters Europe, using his findings to advise on how fans can be involved in anti-discrimination campaigns. He has also published a report on Anti-racism in European Football which he presented at UEFA’s headquarters in Switzerland.

“Racism is not only a problem in football, it’s a problem in society. Until we tackle it in society, we can’t tackle it in football.”

John Barnes, former England player

Empowering football fans to challenge racism

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